
Should we Dispense with the Idea of Personhood? The Impoverishment of Philosophical-Theological Language*

*¿Hay que prescindir de la idea de personalidad?
El empobrecimiento del lenguaje filosófico-teológico*

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José A. COLEN

Universidade do Minho. Centro de Ética, Política e Sociedade (CEPS)
Braga. Portugal
ID ORCID 0000-0003-0270-7416
d8475@uminho.pt

Anthony VECCHIO

University of Texas
Arlington. Estados Unidos
ID ORCID 0000-0001-7374-7269
anthony.vecchio@mavs.uta.edu

Abstract: «Who is a person?» is a question with moral, theological and even legal consequences, but it seems now apparently entangled in intractable puzzles; therefore, it has become frequent to suggest that we should entirely dispense with the idea of «personhood». This essay argues that the notions of «person», and rational «nature» which are essential in theological exploration, cannot be easily discarded from the philosophical vocabulary either. The paper argues that the preferred route of access should preserve the noetic heterogeneity of beings, because it is the current «scientific» straitjacket that has made very articulation of the question fruitless and impoverished.

Keywords: Non-Identity, Personhood, Derek Parfit, Robert Nozick, Bernard Williams, Edmund Husserl.

Resumen: «¿Qué o quién es una persona?» es una pregunta con consecuencias morales, teológicas y legales evidentes, pero que está rodeada de confusión. Se ha sugerido con frecuencia que se debería prescindir por completo de la idea de «personalidad». Este ensayo sostiene que las nociones de «persona» e incluso de «naturaleza» racional, esenciales en teología, no pueden descartarse del vocabulario filosófico. El artículo argumenta que el acceso a la idea de «personalidad» debe preservar la heterogeneidad noética de los seres, porque la camisa de fuerza «científica» que la ignora ha hecho que la misma pregunta sea infructuosa y más pobre.

Palabras clave: No identificada, Persona, Derek Parfit, Robert Nozick, Bernard Williams, Edmund Husserl.

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Hath not a Jew eyes? Hath not a Jew hands, organs, dimensions, senses, affections, passions, fed with the same food, hurt with the same weapons, subject to the same diseases, healed by the same means, warmed and cooled by the same winter and summer as a Christian is? If you prick us, do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh?

Shakespeare

1. INTRODUCTION

«What or who is a person?» or «in what consists personal identity?» are questions which have obvious moral, theological, and even legal consequences¹. An answer to these questions should begin in a way that does not alienate either continental or analytic philosophers, i.e., by examining the articulation of the questions themselves. Indeed, these questions may be said to contain a certain ambiguity, or a certain diversity of meanings. In a sense, these questions point to the set of characteristics that define *a person*, i.e., which make them *the person he or she is*. There is, however, another meaning, which is more basic, if not deeper: «what makes someone *a person*?» Both descriptions – person's identity as *contingent individual specificity* and identity as the *permanent properties of an individual* (or class of individuals, sensitive or rational) are obviously related. We will provisionally take the question in the latter sense.

Nevertheless, it should be remembered that the question can be answered in legal terms rather than philosophical terms: a Roman slave or a baby (or fetus) is not or was not *a person* in some historical moments but, on the contrary, «something» that was born, bought «its» freedom or died in servitude².

¹ This paper draws upon a version of J. A. COLEN, «Minds, Machines, and Identity», a lecture to Fellows of the James Madison Program and the Faculty at Princeton University in January 2017. An abridged version was later presented in Lithuania as part of the Stasys Salkauskis lectures at Siauliai University, May 2018. A. Vecchio has been doing research in the history of modern moral and political ideas, and more recently on the intersection of human animality, vulnerability, and the virtues. Vecchio is the beneficiary of a grant from the Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT).

² VEYNE, P. (ed.), *Histoire de la vie privée*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1999, 57ff.

If in legal terms the answers seem clear though arbitrary – social fiat dominates – the most common philosophical justification is that being a person is inextricably linked to certain «mental» or «moral» properties³ that the slave lacked only *legally*, but fools and babies lack *de facto*. But as war is too important to be left to the military, personhood is too important to be left to lawyers and judges.

As for the philosophical approach, let us just point out that the concept of «person» was not introduced into philosophy without a cost; the Greek word designated the mask used by actors in the tragic theater⁴ and therefore Roman lawyers and Christian theologians had to clarify that by person they meant rational individuals. «Person» designated not only an outward manifestation, but an *individual* being. Similarly, today, those who think that dolphins or pigs have intelligence would consistently call them «non-human persons»⁵. Christians theologians who thought otherwise have reserved the expression for the Divine Persons, angels, and men⁶.

The history behind the Christian meaning of «person», which we inherit and appropriate variously today in the secular world, begins in large part with theological controversies in the first millennium of Christianity. The most conspicuous development came as a result of attending to the difficulties of Christology and Trinitarian theology⁷. The critical turning point came in making sense of Christ's relationship to God, according to the Jewish scriptures, the New Testament, and the patristic testimony.

By the time of Latin Scholasticism, these Trinitarian and Christological controversies had largely been settled. Thomas Aquinas, of course among the primary figures of Latin Scholasticism in the second millennium of Christianity, had the difficulty of critically appropriating the rediscovered Greek thought of Aristotle (counteracting the reading of the Islamic commentators, notably Ibn Sīnā and Ibn Rushd) in a way re-

³ See, for instance, BAKER, L. R., *Persons and Bodies*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000, chap. 3.

⁴ MEYER, C., *The Political Art of Greek Tragedy*, Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993. Although Meyer's work focuses on Aeschylus' tragedies, his description applies to all others tragic authors.

⁵ See, for instance, SINGER, P. (ed.), *In Defense of Animals*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1985, 40-51.

⁶ PLANTINGA, R. J., THOMPSON, T. R. and LUNDBERG, M. D., *An Introduction to Christian Theology*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, part 2, chap. 9.

⁷ See KERESZTY, R. A., *Jesus Christ: Fundamentals of Christology*, 3rd ed., New York: St. Paul's Press, 2011, Part II.

concilable with the Trinitarian theology and Christology which came before him⁸. «Aquinas' success» may make us forget how difficult it was to introduce into philosophy the concept of person.

Unlike the legal definition of «person», this philosophical concept, at first glance, pertains to the individual whose nature is rational from cradle (and even before birth) to grave: idiots and infants alike⁹.

The issues of individual personality became cloudier when modern philosophers (namely, today's analytic philosophers) ceased to think in terms of rational «nature». Our intention in this paper is question how successful both analytic philosophy and some very rigorous phenomenologists (e.g. Husserl), have been on their own terms, insofar as they significantly departed from the notion of person as an individual with a rational nature. This is the more important, for the idea of «nature» opposes the idea of convention, i.e. the idea that everything is merely the result of social fiat (*nomos* opposes *physis*). The first step of our argument, which is not novel, though it deserves to be emphasized, is that both analytic and phenomenological approaches fail because they are still prey of an unresolved fissure. In fact, the most significant departure from the ideas of nature and personhood, went along with the purging of qualities, natures, forms, and other vestiges of Aristotelian metaphysics that dominated philosophy for centuries. This was achieved in an especially poignant way with Descartes.

It is difficult today to read without some surprise the opening passage of Descartes' *Meditation VI*: «Nothing further now remains, but to inquire whether material things exist»¹⁰. Descartes ignores the issue of the union between

⁸ See in particular the studies of the Thomist historian Étienne Gilson. Aquinas' philosophical definition is taken from Boethius: «an individual substance of a rational nature» (*S. Th.*, I, q. 29). In the work of Thomas Aquinas, there is a more extended and profound reflection in that question of the *Summa Theologiae* than that recognized by Boethius. On this topic, a good synthesis can be found in GILSON, E., «Christian Personalism», in *The Spirit of Mediaeval Philosophy*, 189-208, Notre Dame, IN: Notre Dame University Press, 2007 [1936]. More recent scholars elaborate on the topic. See, for example, EBERL, J. T., «Aquinas on the nature of human beings», - *Review of Metaphysics* 58 (2004) 333-365.

⁹ This has immediate consequences on topics such as bioethics, etc. See, namely, EBERL, J. T., «Aquinas's Account of Human Embryogenesis and Recent Interpretations», *Journal of Medicine and Philosophy* 30 (2005) 379-394. Also: WHITE, F. J., «Personhood: An Essential Characteristic of the Human Species», *The Linacre Quarterly* 80 (2013) 74-97.

¹⁰ DESCARTES, R., «Meditations», collected in EATON, R. M., *Descartes Selections*, New York: Scribners Sons, 1927, 145.

the corporeal and the incorporeal – of which Gassendi¹¹ reminds him in his *Fifth objection* – to focus on what truly concerns him: to show that what is outside the mind consists of pure, geometric extension¹². This is a direct consequence of his method; what is true of the concept is true of the thing itself, and only the purging of everything not included in the concept (qualities, nature, forms) could solve the disputes pervasive in the late Aristotelic Scholastic metaphysics, in which Descartes was educated¹³.

The fallout of post-Aristotelian metaphysics was in germ in the very articulation of the Cartesian questions. If the victory of the argument in the public opinion was perhaps achieved by Molière in *The Imaginary Invalid*¹⁴ rather than by sophisticated philosophical reasoning, it was nonetheless immediately apparent to some among the Cartesians that they should take the consequences of the problem raised by Gassendi seriously – *do we have a clear and distinct idea of how the mind affects the body and vice versa?* That question, however, could find no solution in the terms in which it was raised, and so it is not surprising that La Mettrie, in a book titled *L'Homme Machine*, declares about Descartes: «It is true that this famous philosopher made many mistakes, as nobody denies; but he understood animal nature and was the first to demonstrate perfectly that animals were mere machines. (...) how can we, without ingratitude, not pardon all his errors!»¹⁵.

If the efforts of Descartes' followers led his theories to unexpected conclusions, the despair of Descartes himself to find the connection between body and mind somewhere inside the brain – in the infamous pineal gland – introduced the brain into the field of «metaphysical» inquiry for the first time. Following from Descartes' fission of man's nature into two different substances, the problem became one of identity, whose unity appeared somewhat dependent on a connection in the brain¹⁶.

¹¹ GASSENDI, P., «Vth. Objections», collected in EATON, R. M., *Descartes Selections*, 245-246.

¹² DESCARTES, R., «Reply to Objections», collected in EATON, R. M., *Descartes Selections*, 262.

¹³ See GILSON's, E., *Études sur le rôle de la pensée médiévale dans la formation du système cartésien*, Paris: Vrin, 1930.

¹⁴ In his play *Le Malade Imaginaire*, Molière mocked the philosophers claiming that opium made people fall asleep because it contained «dormitive properties». MOLIERE, *Oeuvres complètes de Molière*, vol. 2, Paris: Garnier Frères, 1871, third Act, Scene 3. Mockery proved to be more effective than argumentation in XVIII-century opinion.

¹⁵ LA METTRIE, J. O., *Machine Man and Other Writings*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996, 35.

¹⁶ See GILSON, E., *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937. For a more recent overviews in the Analytic tradition, see WILLIAMS, B., *Descartes: The Project of*

2. IDENTITY, BRAIN-HALVES AND NEW VOCABULARY

2.1. *Bernard Williams's notion of «persistence»*

This issue of identity has more recently occupied the best philosophical «minds» for over sixty years. All these debates culminating in the Non-Identity paradoxes have a genealogy going back to early modernity, and without which genealogy we cannot understand why they are problematic. We must briefly examine some recent debates and try to understand the reason for the impasse that leads some philosophers to entirely dismiss the issues of individual personality or stumble on the mentioned paradoxes (and other problems in the same vein).

The brain is an unknown domain and an uncharted territory whose map is yet full of surprises. Since the 1960s, however, the analytic theories of personality have suffered a strange twist due to the consideration of a curious theoretical problem. Studies of the brain have shown the possibility of «fission»¹⁷ between its two halves, left and right, raising the question, «which of these halves am I?»¹⁸.

Strictly speaking, this formulation is incorrect, even though it continues to be used currently, because the problem suggested by the question stopped being seen as interior (the experience of an «I»), but became instead a phenomenon to be analyzed exteriorly by an impartial observer. The notion of personhood underwent a fission into two different perspectives, namely, the inner self and the view from nowhere. In the intervening decades, in addition to the catalyst thought experiments based on brain fission, we have seen the accumulation of concurrent and incompatible opinions – and rejoinders – based on brain transplants, fourth-dimension travel, and other conceptual experiments which attempt to elucidate the unity of the «person», or how the person is «divided» or transformed over time¹⁹.

Pure Enquiry, New York: Pelican, 1978; and SCRUTON, R., «Descartes», in *A Short History of Modern Philosophy*, London and New York: Routledge, 2002, 29-39. For a critical approach from the viewpoint of a neurologist, DAMÁSIO, A., *Descartes' Error*, New York: Penguin Books, 2005.

¹⁷ OLSON, E., *The Human Animal*, New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999, 46-51. See also: OLSON, E., «Was Jekyll Hyde?», *Philosophy and Phenomenological Research* 66 (2003) 328-348.

¹⁸ The seminal paper was NAGEL's, T. «Brain Bisection and the Unity of Consciousness», *Synthese* 22 (1971) 396-413.

¹⁹ Among those who identify brain and mind are, of course, all reductionists and monists. The trend of physicalist monism, which identifies the mind with the brain, such as those following

«Personal Identity Through Time» is the subject (and title) of the first chapter of Robert Nozick's²⁰ book *Philosophical Explanations*. Nozick in this text reflects on a paradox, or rather of some puzzles which illustrate the paradox that the English philosopher Bernard Williams had posited in a 1970 paper entitled «The Self and the Future»²¹. Williams later included it and expanded his ideas in his book *Problems of the Self*²².

The first puzzle that Williams presents is this: two individuals, A and B, see their memories transferred to each other's body. Before the exchange, A and B are informed that one of the bodies will receive \$100,000 while the other is tortured. Williams notes that regardless of what actually happens to the «A-body-person» with B memories, the new A person identifies himself with the earlier B person, and vice versa²³. This seems to indicate that concern for what happens to oneself in the future does not necessarily involve what happens to one's body, challenging the «philosophical arguments designed to show that bodily continuity [is] at least a necessary condition of personal identity»²⁴. He therefore suggests that it is reasonable for someone to identify himself instead with his own memories, impressions, etc., and not with his body.

But Williams also features a second thought experiment in which A is only informed that he «himself» in the future will be tortured, and that at that future time he will not remember anything that relates to his own past – his images and impressions will come from B. Fear of torture by A, despi-

Eric Olson or, more poignantly, the mind-brain identity theorists («type physicalists») following especially J. J. C Smart, have been resisted by property dualists, or emergentists and anti-reductionists more generally, etc. Good panoramas from both sides of the debate can be found in GARVEY, J. (ed.), *The Bloomsbury Companion to Philosophy of Mind*, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011. Besides this, there is the standard but balanced textbook by KIM, J., *Philosophy of Mind*, 3rd ed., New York and London: Routledge, 2018; also important to note is CHALMERS', D. C. widely used reader on the topic, *Philosophy of Mind: Classical and Contemporary Readings*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002. The literature is so abundant that we could not properly present a landscape view here, but it is interesting to note that Derek Parfit presented his own view of this landscape in «Persons bodies, and human beings», in SIDER, T. et al., *Contemporary debates in metaphysics*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2008, 177-208. See our chapter «Mind, Self and the Need of a Metavocabulary», in MOREIRA, P. (ed.), *Revisiting Richard Rorty*, Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2020, 169-186.

²⁰ NOZICK, R., *Philosophical Explanations*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981, 29-70.

²¹ WILLIAMS, B., «The Self and the Future», *Philosophical Review* 79 (1970) 161-180.

²² WILLIAMS, B., *Problems of the Self*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973.

²³ WILLIAMS, B., *ibid.*, 47-48.

²⁴ WILLIAMS, B., *ibid.*, 51.

te the (anticipated) complete psychological dissociation, leads the author to conclude that the fear that, in spite of everything, plagues A is based on the conviction that «my undergoing physical pain in the future is not excluded by any psychological state I may be in at the time»²⁵. The second case appears to indicate, unlike the first, that bodily continuity is integral to identity. An A-body-person faces «risk» when deciding to transfer the prospect of torture to the B-body-person, and this is the risk that Williams considers («perhaps neurotically»²⁶) the essential feature of the personal identity problem.

The paradox is this: each thought experiment leads to opposite results, despite the situation described being objectively identical, and the impossibility of arriving at a logical conclusion adds to our perplexity. Williams ends, however, with a note. There are aspects of personal identity related to bodily continuity and aspects of «mental» continuity (i.e., experiences and memories)²⁷.

In general, it is assumed that this dichotomy coincides with yet another dichotomy: aspects of personal identity in the first person, that is, the experience of an «I» (mental dimension) and third person, that is, the view from nowhere (the body). The two examples show an unexpectedly inverse relationship between mental properties and bodily persistence, and bodily properties and mental persistence²⁸. Nozick chooses precisely this, among the many puzzles surrounding the issue of identity, to articulate his own approach to the problem: «how, given changes, *can* there be identity of something from one time to another, and in what does this identity consist?»²⁹.

2.2. Nozick's «Closest Continuer» Criterion

Nozick's purpose is to explain the assumptions underlying Williams's paradox. In fact, according to Nozick, it is implied in the paradox that for

²⁵ WILLIAMS, B., *ibid.*, 53.

²⁶ WILLIAMS, B., *ibid.*, 59.

²⁷ WILLIAMS, B., *ibid.*, 62.

²⁸ WILLIAMS, B., *ibid.*, 64 and ff.; specially objections 70-81. Nevertheless, Williams seems to know more than what this *aporia* suggests and, in a subsequent essay, he uses language analysis to refute the (four) objections that still upset the affirmative answer to the question «Are people bodies?».

²⁹ NOZICK, R., *Philosophical Explanations*, 29.

something (x) to be the *same* as something else (y) through time, we must assume that identity depends on certain properties of both (x, y); it also depends on the mutual relationship between (x) and (y) through time – *but* that no other factors should be considered to establish such identity.

Nozick's own alternative argument is to suggest that most of these paradoxes can be dissolved by resorting to a much simpler idea, that of the «closest continuer». We could describe this as following the uninterrupted development of the persons or things³⁰.

Is this so? Nozick gives a graphic example and explores its transposition into the case of personal identity: Vienna Circle survivors meet again in Istanbul and consider themselves the followers of the same group, only to discover afterwards that the remaining members took refuge in the US. Which is the «true» Vienna circle? What defines identity over time?³¹ This metaphor sheds some light on the issue and leads him to think that what is called identity through time is the «*closest continuer*»³². The notion to which we refer when we speak of the identity of things is *continuity*. That allows us to provide the framework for an answer, but not yet to fill in the details thereof, because there are at least two important properties to consider: spatial-temporal continuity and continuity of features or physical elements.

Put differently, the situation resembles another puzzle, that of Theseus' ship. The planks of the ship were replaced periodically, and the originals stored, only for it to be discovered later that another ship was constructed only with the original boards. Continuity in space and time points to the existence of Theseus' ship that was kept through gradual maintenance; but the continuity of the physical elements regards the ship that, in this example, is born again from the original boards which had been stored³³.

Nozick finds application of this continuity theory to the problem of personality in various cases in which: the brain is duplicated, including its me-

³⁰ According to Nozick, «It does help us (...) with very many of the problems discussed in the literature under the rubric "personal identity", for these problems, though phrased about persons, to a surprising extent turn out to be general problems that apply to any kind of thing's identity through time. Not only our discussion thus far but also, I claim, the existing literature usually hasn't been concerned with the problem special to personal identity». NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 70.

³¹ NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 29-31.

³² NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 33.

³³ NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 29-33.

mories (case 1); is transplanted (case 2); brain patterns are transferred from a dying person to a new person (3); only half of the brain is transplanted (4); or removed (5); or both simultaneously (6); or even that a similar brain is generated at random in the infinite universe (7). Yet further (8), Nozick also notes that it is not impossible, as in the Vienna Circle analogy, for there to be an overlap of two identical persons³⁴.

These thought experiments allow him to clarify what we mean by the continuity of personal identity over time and to establish the conceptual approach to tackling the problem, resorting to notions such as «relational», «closest relative», and especially «intrinsic abstract structural» description of identity³⁵. «Intrinsic abstract structure» is something strangely analogous to the Aristotelian «form» mocked by Molière³⁶.

Nozick's claim is that the first step towards illuminating the special nature of the self is to exclude reifying it into a solid, ontological item (or to consider it, as he says, «part of the furniture of the universe»³⁷). Further steps would exclude other seemingly relevant criteria, such as reflexivity and self-synthesis. According to him, viewing the self as a mere property not just dispels illusions created by this reification, but also illuminates the linguistic views of the self³⁸.

Nozick's surprising conclusion is that, even in most of these extreme situations, we can predict in which cases a person has an identity over time with the simple model of the «closest continuer», while ignoring the «underlying complexity». Underlying complexity is shorthand for all the mental and physical differences, impressions, and memories of each and every individual – or, to put it briefly, the set of characteristics that define a person as defined in the beginning of this paper, i.e., the contingent subject of «personality»³⁹.

Nozick, as a libertarian political theorist, inclines towards the thesis of libertarian free will, and, unlike La Mettrie, believes that we are not just «machine-men»; eventually, he ends up wondering whether it is un-

³⁴ NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 37-40.

³⁵ NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 47-48.

³⁶ See ARISTOTLE'S, *Metaphysics*, I, with NOZICK, R., *Philosophical Explanations*, 47.

³⁷ NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 110. See the whole Chapter 1, 27-114.

³⁸ See his discussions of the Aristotelian view of accidents on pp. 111-112.

³⁹ NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 110-114.

reasonable that those «philosophical problems that have withstood centuries of determined attempts to solve or dissolve them» should not be easily discarded⁴⁰.

2.3. Parfit's «Relation R» or «overlapping chains of strong connectedness»

If Nozick kept these problems on the philosophical agenda, Derek Parfit brought them to perfection in his book *Reasons and Persons*⁴¹. There, the devices of science fiction stories, such as Star Trek-type teleportation through space and time, entered his metaphysics. It is obvious that, at this point, we may ask ourselves (as Quine did):

The method of science fiction has its uses in philosophy, but (...) I wonder whether the limits of the method are properly heeded. To seek what is «logically required» for sameness of person under unprecedented circumstances is to suggest that words have some logical force beyond what our past needs have invested them with⁴².

Parfit, however, was convinced that these imaginary situations involved something more than words: deep beliefs about what personal identity is⁴³. He first describes space-time continuity, which is the normal identity criterion for physical objects, and then psychological and physical criteria. His purpose is to clarify the false assumptions of «physicalism» or materialism about the mind, that is, the thesis that there is nothing real about mental states as such; they are no more than another kind of physical event. Not all philosophers are materialists but, according to Parfit, those who are not «physicalists» are dualists or idealists. What he tries to show is that, paradoxically, materialists might accept the psychological criterion of continuity of the person and the

⁴⁰ NOZICK, R., *ibid.*, 114. He finishes the essay stating: «Yet, in this instance I do not find the view of the self as a property sufficiently illuminating, clarifying, and fruitful in its consequences to put it forth, except as a curiosity, despite its explaining why certain puzzle about the self have arisen, and despite its providing some enduring entity for the self to be».

⁴¹ PARFIT, D., *Reasons and Persons*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984, Third Part. See also our paper in «Reaction and Debate: Derek Parfit, In Memoriam (1942-2017)», *Ethical Perspectives* 25 (2018) 321-338.

⁴² QUINE, W. V., «Review of Milton K. Munitz (ed.), *Identity and Individuation*», *The Journal of Philosophy* 69 (1972) 490. Parfit does not ignore the problem: PARFIT, D., *Reasons and Persons*, 199.

⁴³ PARFIT, D., *Reasons and Persons*, 179.

dualist could accept the physiological criteria of temporal continuity. This paradox seems revealing to him: as there is no adequate criterion of personal identity through time, he concludes that *persons do not exist beyond their elements*. According to him, persons do not exist beyond their present configuration of physical and mental composition.

Parfit asserts that reality should be described impersonally (from Mars, as the French saying goes). There does not have to be a definite answer to the question «will I continue to exist?» even after examining all the data involved. It is a mistake to assume that what is of interest in personal identity is survival; what matters is the relation R – that he describes as «overlapping chains of strong connectedness»⁴⁴. (Now, at this point we may wonder if such obscure phraseology is any better than the Aristotelian notion of «form» that Descartes jettisoned, and Molière mocked).

Before proposing that the «liberation from the self» is what matters⁴⁵, he states the four major conclusions that would follow. His contentions are as counter-intuitive as they are contrary to the now-depreciated common sense or *doxa*: (1) «We are not separately existing entities, apart from our brains and bodies, and various interrelated physical and mental events (...) (2) It is not true that, in every case (...) [the question of identity] must have an answer»; (3) we can explain the unity of consciousness at a certain point in time, and the unity of a whole life «without claiming that these experiences are had by a person»; (4) therefore, «[p]ersonal identity is not what matters», only the «Relation R (...)»⁴⁶.

The problem of the *criterion* of defining identity through time does not, therefore, exhaust the controversy. There is also debate as to whether personal identity matters, or personal survival, and some suggest that the collective survival of humanity is more important⁴⁷. A Kantian might perhaps raise the objection that we are lacking the resources to describe moral agency⁴⁸, but the

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 233-238.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 281.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 216-217.

⁴⁷ See SCHEFFLER, S., *Death and the Afterlife*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 15 and ff.

⁴⁸ The description of identity grounded in moral agency seems insufficient to us despite the best efforts to recover Kantianism. But the debate persists. On the limits of Kant's notion based on moral agency, see KORSGAARD, C., *Creating the Kingdom of Ends*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996. See esp. Ch. 13, «Personal identity and the unity of agency: a Kantian response to Parfit», 363ff. This is probably the most famous recent recovery of Kantianism within the Analytic tradition, but we deem it insufficient.

contingent birth of Kant was previously submitted to the same «torture» by Parfit: were the Prussian philosopher conceived a few seconds later, then, for biological reasons, Kant would not be Kant⁴⁹.

3. NOVELTY, THE LIMITS OF LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS, AND THE OFFICIAL DOCTRINE

What is at stake with this new vocabulary replacing old-fashioned notions such as «nature» and «person»? Complex arguments, refuted assertions, real and improbable counterexamples, outrageous theses and stubborn convictions, puzzles, abstract and very real conditions, challenges to the discovery of new theses and surprising conclusions are all part of an analytic philosopher's ecumenical paraphernalia⁵⁰. Nevertheless, what is really at stake in these debates, involving more than a hundred book titles since 1970 – not to mention the countless scientific papers – seems to be always centered around the need to clarify the concepts or the beliefs embedded in language.

That is why Quine's question seems so relevant. Do words have some power beyond the force which the past social need for words invested in them? The risk is that *puzzles*, challenges, and arguments *show us no more* than the logical consequences of our own convictions, or opinions, or even prejudices. Of course, sometimes the results are counter-intuitive, which is a situation that should not be surprising, since the task that science and philosophy have imposed on themselves for three centuries is to replace the concepts of common sense with rigorous artificial «constructs», or, if we prefer an older idiom, to replace *doxa* with *epistēmē*.

In this context, it does not even seem significant that the search for truth, generally considered impossible to achieve, gets replaced by the mere clarification of concepts. The perplexity that remains after revisiting this controversy is whether philosophers know *much more* than their method allows⁵¹. It is not clear how the analysis of language leads to Bernard Williams' purported physicalism, supports Robert Nozick's telescopic view of the

⁴⁹ PARFIT, D., *Reasons and Persons*, 352 and ff.

⁵⁰ Cfr. NOZICK, R., *Anarchy, State, and Utopia*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1974.

⁵¹ We cannot explore here this question, but it may suffice to point out SHOEMAKER's, S., «Parfit on Identity», in DANCY, J. (ed.), *Reading Parfit*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, 135-148. See also our paper in «Reaction and Debate: Derek Parfit, In Memoriam (1942-2017)», *Ethical Perspectives* 25 (2018) 321-338. As for Nozick, see the next footnote.

universe⁵², or to disintegrating Derek Parfit's own «Self» into a kind of diluted collective.

Because in each case there remains the dichotomy between physical and psychological (or mental) continuity, we are thus led to conclude that we remain imprisoned in a Cartesian dualism. Indeed, it is hard not to recognize some truth in Gilbert Ryle's assessment: «There is a doctrine about the nature and place of minds which is so prevalent among theorists and even among laymen that it deserves to be described as the official theory»⁵³. In short, according to the author of *The Concept of Mind*, most philosophers, psychologists, and believers, although admitting difficulties and reservations as to details (which they assume «can be overcome without serious modifications being made to the architecture of the theory»⁵⁴), adhere today to a creed or doctrine which springs mainly from Descartes and states approximately the following:

With the doubtful exceptions of idiots and infants in arms every human being has both a body and a mind. Some would prefer to say that every human being is both a body and a mind. His body and his mind are ordinarily harnessed together, but after the death of the body his mind may continue to exist and function. Human bodies are in space and are subject to the mechanical laws which govern all other bodies in space. Bodily processes and states can be inspected by external observers. So a man's bodily life is as much a public affair as are the lives of animals and reptiles and even as the careers of trees, crystals and planets.

But minds are not in space, nor are their operations subject to mechanical laws. The workings of one mind are not witnessable by other observers; its career is private. Only I can take direct cognisance of the states and processes of my own mind⁵⁵.

Consequently, we tend to think «as if» there is a ghost in La Mettrie's machine. To think otherwise would be more than problematic. Apparently, it

⁵² BRATMAN, M. E., *Structures of Agency*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, 107 and ff. explores this problem and highlights the fact that Nozick addresses this question because the lack of free-will undermines human dignity. Cfr. NOZICK, R., *Philosophical Explanations*, 291.

⁵³ RYLE, G., *The Concept of Mind*, London: Hutchinson's University Library, 2009, 1.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 1-2. By shortening the text, we also removed some paragraphs.

is unthinkable, and we are entangled in a seemingly indestructible vocabulary⁵⁶. Although today we notice that most philosophers, or at least the non-believers, tend to think that the mind does not exist or works after death⁵⁷, even «physicalists» report two parallel stories, that of the body and that of the mind, and turn to «consciousness», self-awareness, and introspection as a source of answers.

Williams, we suspect, did not lose much time with statistics (except perhaps a show of hands in his classroom) to reach the conclusion that we prefer to be brain A in body B, or avoid the pain of body A: he merely resorted to self-knowledge. And Parfit did not free himself of the metaphors of «inside» and «outside», «external» and «internal» to describe the mental space: he just asserted that the mind that commands and the legs, arms, and tongue that obey or what the eye sees and the mind perceives as smiles and grimaces that reveal moods can be described impersonally and that the «Relation R» is more important than the «Self», without being able to avoid mentioning mental phenomena, since he depends on memories and impressions.

Ryle's efforts to describe man through his behavior, without reference to intentions, thoughts and sensations that precede, accompany, and succeed man's actions, were relatively successful, but his «monism» was unable to eliminate «common sense» dualism.

Looking back, Karl Popper's comment in *Objective Knowledge* still seems current. While he seeks a solution to Hume's paradox and discusses the mind-body problem, he notes that many theories that attempt to overcome dualism end up defending some kind of monism, without fully overcoming the former, and revealing instead an underlying dualism⁵⁸. He himself, in his *Unended Quest*, prefers to describe himself as a pluralist, though he would rather be considered a dualist than to uphold any form of monism⁵⁹. In an interview with John Eccles, he even entertains the possibility that there really

⁵⁶ In the case of Richard Rorty, see our COLEN, J. A. and VECCHIO, A., «Mind, Self and the Need of a Metavocabulary», in MOREIRA, P. (ed.), *Revisiting Richard Rorty*, Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2020.

⁵⁷ See SCHEFFLER, S., *Death and the Afterlife*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

⁵⁸ See an explanation in POPPER, K., *Objective Knowledge*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1979, 153 and ff. On the emergence of Popper's view according to Ian Jarvie, see our «The Republic of Sciences and Its Citizens», in *The Impact of Critical Rationalism*, New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019, 173-188.

⁵⁹ POPPER, K., *Unended Quest*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, 218.

is a «ghost in the machine»⁶⁰. It is true that he avoids talking about «substances», but his solution nevertheless reveals the connection between two different kinds of things: «Popper goes so far as to propose a kind of interactionism as a solution to the mind-body problem, and he strongly criticizes materialist theories. His ideas may seem insufficient when considered in the light of a spiritualistic metaphysics and are problematic insofar as interactionism is too dependent on a Cartesian dualism»⁶¹. He criticizes physicalism because both making statements that can be true or false and making arguments that can be valid or invalid – two preconditions for the progress of empirical science – «are closely related to the singularity of human beings»⁶².

Recent debates in the sequence of analytic libertarian metaphysics, in the manner of Robert Kane, do not escape the dilemmas of the relation between minds and brains⁶³ (assuming full control of the body by the brain).

This is an instance where Popper identifies dualism as being replaced with monism, yet concealing an underlying dualism. Whatever we think about these ill-solved problems, Ryle nonetheless identifies correctly his «culprit», the author of the «official doctrine»: Descartes.

Descartes' intention had been to «geometrically» prove the «spirituality» of the mind. He began by replacing the scholastic soul with a mind without a body. This mathematical Cartesianism requires the fission of reality into two substances as different as the ideas that we have about them, in such a way that when the *philosopher is busy with metaphysical notions he should not know that he has a body*, and when the *scientist is busy with physics it is best that he forgets that he has a mind*. The Cartesian mind is essentially thought. It is a thinking thing (*res cogitans*). It is «a thing which

⁶⁰ See in particular Popper in ECCLES, J. and POPPER, K., *The Self and Its Brain*, Berlin: Springer, 1977, 464. See ARTIGAS, M., *The Mind of the Universe*, Philadelphia and London: Templeton Foundation Press, 1999, 243-244. The book as a whole may be taken as a critical survey.

⁶¹ ARTIGAS, M., *The Mind of the Universe*, 243. Artigas continues, «Nevertheless, they also show that a person like him, not committed to any specific metaphysical or religious position, can reach a nonmaterialistic view of the human person that is also compatible with an evolutionary perspective».

⁶² *Ibid.*, 244.

⁶³ See the collection of texts in PALMER, D., *Libertarian Free Will*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014. One particularly lively debate concerns that between those who are libertarian about free will and those who are compatibilists or determinists. See our «Review of David Palmer (ed.). *Libertarian Free Will: Contemporary Debates*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014», *Ethical Perspectives* 23 (2016) 362-366, co-authored with WILLIAMS, L.

doubts, understands, conceives, affirms, denies, wills, refuses, which also imagines and feels»⁶⁴. but not something that feeds or moves because such notions refer to the body, which is an altogether different idea, clear but distinct.

Of course, as Étienne Gilson reports in *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*⁶⁵, when Voltaire crossed the English Channel in 1728, he met the flourishing of the moderate empiricism of Locke, instead of the logical Cartesian «dreamers», who were emmeshed in the mind-body problem, or of the «communication of substances»⁶⁶. Locke's was deemed, by Voltaire, as «moderate» in his empiricism because he did not ignore facts nor he did derive a law from a single fact, steering off a middle course between dogmatic rationalism and extreme empiricism⁶⁷.

Locke, however, in the first chapter of his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*⁶⁸, if he denies innate ideas, he does assert that we come across things through sensations (external or bodily) and reflection (about the inner workings of the mind). We are thus facing still two sources of knowledge and two realities. Of course, the mind travels in the same carriage that moves the body, and Locke does not rule out the existence of a «thinking matter» as the essence of the mind, a solution that obviates the problem of the communication between two completely different «natures» of kinds of things⁶⁹.

According to Locke «personhood» is just a «forensic» concept; it is supposed to track one's interests and responsibilities⁷⁰. Voltaire was drawn to

⁶⁴ DESCARTES, R., «Meditations», collected in EATON, R. M., *Descartes Selections*, 100.

⁶⁵ GILSON, E., *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1937, 164.

⁶⁶ VOLTAIRE, *Lettres philosophiques*, vol. 2, Paris: Hachette, 1917, 1 and 5.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*: see GILSON, E., *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 166.

⁶⁸ LOCKE, J., *An Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, vol. 1, London: St. John, 1877, 129.

⁶⁹ See *ibid.*, vol. 2, 339-411.

⁷⁰ Locke's approach is far more complex than most of his modern followers. In his essay, Locke distinguishes between human beings and persons. Although, as in the case of any other living being, the persistence of the human being is guaranteed by the continuity of the particles that constitute it, the synchronous identity of a person depends on the possession and effective exercise of consciousness, while identity diachronic derives from the continuity of its memories, that is, from memory. In addition, Locke also did not overlook the relevance that for a complete conception of personhood had their interest (concern) for their future (*Essay on Human Understanding*, Book II, Ch. 27). To sum up, for Locke, the identity conditions of the former are not those of the latter. We thank the reviewers of *Scripta Theologica* for this clarification.

Locke's hypothetical materialism⁷¹. A larger chasm than that existing between the two halves of the brain was to last. But, as is widely known, Hume drew out the logical consequences of Locke's empiricism: we have neither innate ideas nor innate principles, nor can we observe physical causality, which is nothing more than a spatial-temporal contiguity. Nor can we see inside the «Self», which is nothing but a bundle of «inner feelings»⁷².

To sum up, the response to the question, «what does a person's identity consist of?» still stumbles into the same dichotomy; for all that has happened between Hume's age and ours is that the «metaphysical status of the problem», as Ryle calls it, has changed: today we speak of the brain or «thinking matter» because the mind is a fruit or a re-description of the body. Not even Kant awake from his dogmatic slumber⁷³ could free himself of the notion of the mind as a Regulatory Idea (though he was unable to demonstrate its existence), since thoughts and feelings have what he called an «apodictic» character: they are self-evident to us⁷⁴.

The problem is compounded because even if we think that chimeras are an illusion, or pain a mere nervous reflex, and our identity nothing but a confusing set of synapses connected to each other, we can nevertheless hardly deny that we dream about chimeras and we feel pain when we feel it. For this reason, those who are unconvinced of Anglophone empiricism and reject the impersonal description found in the analytic theory of identity persist in beginning with the mind (as Descartes).

4. HUSSERL'S MEDITATIONS: IF PHENOMENOLOGY IS THE ANSWER, WHAT IS THE QUESTION?

Given the stubborn persistence of the problem, we might be tempted to think that rational argument, reflective balance, logical positivism, philosophy of language, and other akin methods and systems of thought, do not by themselves do justice to the scope of human experience, and we should look to ri-

⁷¹ See GILSON, E., *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 172.

⁷² HUME, D., *A Treatise of Human Nature*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1960, 252.

⁷³ KANT, E., *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004. See the preface.

⁷⁴ See BLACKBURN'S, S., «Has Kant Refuted Parfit?», in *Reading Parfit*, 180-201. See our own synthesis in *Porque Pensamos Como Pensamos: Uma História das Ideias Sociais e Políticas*, Porto: Aster, 2020, 116-118.

gorous efforts within the continental tradition, which also dispensed with the idea of nature and similar vocabulary.

But does first person phenomenology fare any better? Phenomenology seems to be able to account for the diachronic unity of the subject, which is personal identity through time without putting the «I» outside or above the flow of experience. Although we live by a set of experiences, beyond it remains a «Self» that feels these experiences. The feeling of «being mine» seems immune to error, a phenomenon known as «immunity to error through misidentification relative to the first-person pronoun»⁷⁵. According to Husserl, any type of experience (perception, memory, imagination) has a common timeframe such that any moment of experience contains a reference to retained moments of past experience, an opening to what is present and a potential anticipation of experience on the verge of happening. This retention does not instantly disappear but lasts over time, and without this duration many perceptions would be inexplicable. Husserl's favorite example of this is the musical melody. Husserl asserts: «When I say I, I grasp myself in a simple reflection. But this self-experience is like every experience, and in particular every perception, a mere directing myself towards something that was already there for me, that was already conscious, but not thematically experienced, not noticed»⁷⁶. Being aware of oneself is, of course, not the same as capturing a pure self, which exists apart from the flow of experience. When Hume in his *Treatise on Human Nature* states that he never finds a «self» while inspecting his inner experiences, but only particular sensations and perceptions, he ignores this basic datum, because he seeks the «self» among his experiences of himself. Personal identity is, however, per Husserl, a door that opens outwards.

Husserl claims, notwithstanding, that this pre-conscious reflection is only implicit, which means that I am not confronted with the experience of things as belonging to myself. The idea of pre-conscious reflection relates to the idea that experiences have a subjective tone, a certain phenomenal quality of «how one feels». It is typically the case with bodily experiences, such as pain

⁷⁵ HUSSERL, E., *Erste Philosophie*, vol. 8, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1959 [1923/24]. Wittgenstein also addressed this question in his *Blue Book* (WITTGENSTEIN, L., *The Blue and Brown Books*, New York: Harper and Row, 1958, 66-67) and Shoemaker popularized the expression (SHOEMAKER, S., «Self-reference and Self-awareness», *Journal of Philosophy* 65 [1968] 555-567).

⁷⁶ HUSSERL, E., *Zur Phänomenologie der Intersubjektivität*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, 492-493.

or pleasure, but it is also the case with perceptual experiences, or desire, or intellectual comprehension. To taste something is different from recalling that we tasted it. There exists, simultaneously with these experiences, something that runs through all these feelings and perceptions, which is the idea that, despite all their diversity, there is a certain identity – the stark character of perceptions in the first person, a certain *being mine* or being my experiences, an immediate data that is not mediated by ideas or representations. Being mine is not a quality like being red or hard; it does not refer to experienced content, nor to a synchronic and diachronic sum of experiences. Rather, it refers to their presence in the first person, because they are «mine» in a different way from being someone else's⁷⁷.

The *inspectio sui*, according to Husserl, is a precondition of the «self-direction» of the will itself. The self-awareness is neither a mirror of the act of thinking, nor a complete distortion of that act. Husserl, however, faced the same difficulty that Descartes faced before the evil genius in leaving the inner self, which explains why he starts as a quasi-idealist and is usually ignored by sober analytic philosophy. In a relatively late text, his *Cartesian Meditations*, he shows beyond the «elective affinities» that he presents (he proposes a neo-Cartesianism) the same psychological root of his project: a dissatisfaction with the present state of affairs, and the consequent pursuit of «philosophy as rigorous science»⁷⁸. Husserl notes:

The splintering of present-day philosophy, with its perplexed activity, sets us thinking. When we attempt to view western philosophy as a unitary science, its decline since the middle of the nineteenth century is unmistakable (...) Instead of a unitary living philosophy, we have a philosophical literature growing beyond all bounds and almost without coherence. Instead of a serious discussion among conflicting theories that, in their very conflict, demonstrate the intimacy with which they belong together, the commonness of their underlying convictions, and an unwavering belief in a true philosophy, we have a pseudo-reporting and a

⁷⁷ On perception in Husserl, see the excellent summary by MULLIGAN, K., «Perception», in SMITH, B. and SMITH, D. W. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

⁷⁸ A short introduction to the thought of Husserl can be found in MOHANTY, J. N., «The development of Husserl's thought», in SMITH, B. and SMITH, D. R. (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to Husserl*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

pseudo-criticizing, a mere semblance of philosophizing seriously with and for one another⁷⁹.

In short, there are nearly as many philosophies as philosophers, something akin to the many and variegated «sects» of scholastic philosophers⁸⁰, and a situation not unlike that which Descartes encountered, leading him to search for a firm foundation in the *cogito*. Both were ambitious efforts resorting to «consciousness» or the «Self» as the starting point, albeit with one major difference. Husserl always considered his task as a collaborative one, while Descartes noted that the works «directed by many men are less perfect than that in which a single individual intervenes»⁸¹. However, Husserl, like Descartes before him, took mathematics as a standard and it is no wonder that the «conscience» or «Self» is, in both cases, the Archimedean point for moving the world. Husserl provides the answer to the question of identity only if the question is «how to achieve a firm and rigorous science?»⁸² But one must choose between an impartial and rigorous observation, and a committed self. We cannot have the cake and eat it too. The diachronic continuity of a person is a subjective «I» that cannot be grasped impartially.

It is therefore not without irony that, just as Locke and Hume in a sense extend and radicalize Descartes, Heidegger does the same thing with Husserl. Husserl thought that neo-Kantians in his reflection on science were beginning by the roof⁸³. Husserl realized, furthermore, that scientific knowledge of the world was not the perfection of its «natural understanding», but a derivation of it that makes us forget the very foundations of scientific knowledge: all knowledge must begin with the perception of the world as it exists *before any theorizing*. Heidegger followed this line of thought even further. The

⁷⁹ HUSSERL, E., *Cartesian Meditations*, Dordrecht: Springer-Science+Business Media B.V., 1960, 4-6, modified in the German version HUSSERL, E., *Cartesianische Meditationen und Pariser Vortr ge*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1973, 5-6. By shortening the text, we removed some paragraph breaks.

⁸⁰ GILSON, E., *The Unity of Philosophical Experience*, 131; see DESCARTES, R., *Discours de la m thode: texte et commentaire*, GILSON, E. (ed.), Paris: J. Vrin, 1930, 128.

⁸¹ DESCARTES, R., *Discours de la m thode et essais*, Paris: L opold Cerf, 1902, 11: «il n'y a pas tant de perfection dans les ouvrages compos s de plusieurs pi ces, & faits de la main de divers ma tres, qu'en ceux auxquels un seul   travaill ».

⁸² See the beginning of the seminal essay of HUSSERL, E., «Philosophie als strenge Wissenschaft», *Logos* 1 (1910) 289-341.

⁸³ Cfr. STRAUSS, L., «Philosophy as Rigorous Science and Political Philosophy», *Interpretation* 2 (1971) 1-9.

primary subject is not perception, but things as experienced in the individual human context to which they belong, including the historical context. There cannot therefore be a «natural understanding» of the world because every understanding is historical.

Heidegger explains his point this way: «the Dasein. as existing, is there for itself, even when the ego does not expressly direct itself to itself in the manner of its own peculiar turning around and turning back, which in phenomenology is called inner perception as contrasted with outer. The self is there for the Dasein itself without reflection and without inner perception, *before* all reflection. Reflection, in the sense of a turning back, is only a mode of self-apprehension, but not the mode of primary self-disclosure»⁸⁴.

A radical historicism, existentialist, as Heidegger's, rejects the possibility of any objective analysis since all life is *commitment*. His reasoning runs as follows: «Moreover, since the theoretical analysis has its basis outside of life, it will never be able to understand life. The theoretical analysis of life is non-committal and fatal to commitment, but life means commitment»⁸⁵. Husserl's existentialist descendants define thinking as essentially subservient to life. According to Heidegger (or Sartre), this world is hopelessly subjective. All knowledge is based on an unprovable vision of the world, and no alternative is left to us except choosing *in the face of nothingness*⁸⁶. Neutrality or suspension of judgment (*epochē*) is impossible. What matters is the seriousness of the commitment. Between rigorous philosophy and existential *pathos*, we said, one must choose.

5. THE BURDENS OF REASON AND NOETIC HETEROGENEITY

It is perhaps an exaggeration to say that Descartes was thus the initiator of brain-body metaphysics. But it is surely true that the straitjacket in which Cartesian dualism (or idealist monism, or physicalist monism) keeps us was born out of a search for an «exactness» or rigor and certainty which proved excessive. The surprise facing the wide variety of experience and categories of thought paved the way to Montaigne's brand of skepticism, from which Des-

⁸⁴ HEIDEGGER, M., *Die Grundprobleme der Phänomenologie*, Frankfurt am Main: Vittorio Klostermann, 1975, 159.

⁸⁵ STRAUSS, L., *Natural Right and History*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1965, 26.

⁸⁶ HEIDEGGER, M., *Being and Time*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1962, 279 and ff.

cartes, Husserl, and Parfit, among many others, tried to escape by rigorous philosophical efforts. But we may have to sacrifice this degree of accuracy in a tradeoff between precision and knowledge.

Let us not forget that Socratic puzzles came in the form «What is F?», although Socrates did not focus on the ultimate principles of the universe. If the Platonic dialogues include many Socratic *puzzles*, these are directed towards man's pursuit of excellence, or to the question of how we should live. Perhaps personal identity should be explored as *consisting of projects or purposes*, people being defined by their social relationships and practical reasoning as «dependent rational animals» (to abuse MacIntyre's expression)⁸⁷. We may turn from the mere description of identity as *permanent properties of an individual* (or class of individuals, sensitive or rational), as mere logical «sameness», to descriptions of person's identity as *contingent individual specificity* and identity – without dispensing the hard-won vocabulary of «nature» and «person».

The recovery of this possible access to the question of identity has the advantage of bringing philosophy from the heavens down to earth, i.e., of treating every problem according to the different ways in which they appear to man. Each time one of the pre-Socratic philosophers discovered one of the principles of things, he could not resist reducing everything to this definite or indefinite principle (water, air, movement, *apeiron*). Socrates, however, took on the issues in their collective noetic heterogeneity, which implied temporarily setting aside the pretensions of science.

Even in the theoretical realm, the consideration of each problem as one among a noetically heterogeneous many has a secondary advantage, and not a negligible one. It certainly helps in preventing the most common fallacies in the unfinished quest for «exact» logico-linguistic or phenomenological answers about personal identity – which look otherwise tempting because they emerge as possible shortcuts. Both fleshless spiritualism and accounting for are fallacies that enjoy exceptional influence in the ethics and social sciences of our time. Some examples include explaining human identity through the subconscious or sexual libido, in class membership, in the pursuit of naked power, or in self-interest.

⁸⁷ MACINTYRE, A., *Dependent Rational Animals*, Chicago and La Salle: Open Court, 1999.

On the contrary, starting with the identity of a person as defined by his or her projects (or *telos*) can reveal a surprising variety of behaviors. The truth is that even analytic personality theory recognizes (and then forgets) that a person/brain A can, after all, not choose a body B to avoid torture if such a one is a Christian phenomenologist in the concentration camps, like Edith Stein, or can dispense with seeking the \$100,000 reward at all costs, even if he is a Harvard student involved in game theory facing unjust outputs. There are many layers to identity, each with its own thickness.

Many of these «exact» logico-linguistic or phenomenological models conflict with each other, and some become obsolete because they cannot account for certain facets of experience. The basic assumptions of these efforts, as Isaiah Berlin was fond of repeating, despite much brute experience left out or included, imply the uncritical transfer of methods from one sector to another (say from mathematics to Cartesianism, from Newtonian physics to Kant's investigation of the universe, from formal logic to Russell's philosophy, from formal algebra to Husserl's *inspecto sui*, etc.), such that such-and-such method's application distorts all observation.

The examination of the proposals of three different recent philosophers within the Analytic tradition, on the question of human identity and personhood, Bernard Williams, Robert Nozick, and Derek Parfit, reveal that, despite their claims to discard the self as among the entities that are part of the «metaphysical furniture» of the cosmos, as one of them says, all end up resorting to some kind of quasi-ontological vocabulary. Moreover, insofar as Husserl's phenomenology aimed to make philosophy a rigorous science, we found this attempt prone to the same pitfall.

We are, therefore, inclined to agree with Isaiah Berlin's diagnostic: logical positivism, analytic philosophy, and rigorous and ambitious efforts in the empiricist tradition use a substrate of unanalyzed assumptions and frameworks that their own methods cannot explain, and which render their claims of ultimate explanation empty⁸⁸. We tried to trace these unanalyzed assumptions back to Descartes' fission of the self into two substances, that

⁸⁸ See the essays of BERLIN, I., «Verification», and «Empirical Propositions and Hypothetical Statements», gathered in *Concepts and Categories*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999, 15-40 and 41-71, respectively.

follows from his method. Isaiah Berlin used to say that «[i]t is the sense of the general texture of experience – the most rudimentary awareness of such patterns – that constitutes the foundation of knowledge, that is itself not open to inductive or deductive reasoning: for both these methods rest upon it»⁸⁹.

Like Isaiah Berlin, we suggest that an agent with purposes in a world that presents obstacles is the most fundamental *datum*. Grasping it implies avoiding the tendency to follow Hume and Locke in interpreting man as a bundle of emotions, feelings, a *tabula rasa* on which sense impressions are inscribed. It also implies escaping the dubious effort of categorizing all meaningful propositions in clear logical classes, while rejecting the others as meaningless and devoid of truth.

This contention may seem trivial and unoriginal, but it is so important that we deem it worth revisiting, throughout the examination of the underlying assumptions of these different thinkers, whose influence on the current approaches to the idea of personhood cannot be understated⁹⁰. We do not attempt to give a panoramic account of the analytic and phenomenological traditions⁹¹ on personal identity, but merely to point out that, perhaps because nature abhors a vacuum, these recent attempts to dispense with the idea of personhood resort to a vocabulary whose assumptions are no less metaphysical than its classical predecessors (call it «R Relationship», «closest continuer», or whatever), but end up risking an impoverishment of the philosophical-theological language. They got rid of the personal «self» only to find a cache of old questions in need of old answers, resulting in a number of paradoxes and «repugnant» and «absurd» conclusions – in Parfit's own words⁹². As a result of such impoverishment, it is not

⁸⁹ BERLIN, I., *Concepts and Categories*, 114–115.

⁹⁰ As an example, see MCMAHAN, J., «Infanticide», *Utilitas* 19,2 (2007) 131–159. Many more instances of this kind can be found in the references to E. Olson's entry in the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on personal identity. See OLSON, E. T., «Personal Identity», in ZALTA, E. N. (ed.), *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (Fall 2019 Edition), URL = <<https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2019/entries/identity-personal/>>.

⁹¹ Husserl's phenomenology obviously does not exhaust continental thought. It may suffice to point out TUGENDHAT's, E., *Self-Consciousness and Self-Determination*, STERN, P. (trans.), Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1989; or RICOEUR, P., *Oneself As Another*, BLAMEY, K. (trans.), Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1990. Again, we thank the anonymous reviewer of *Scripta Theologica* for these suggestions.

⁹² PARFIT, D., *Persons and Reasons*, 381, 391.

much of an exaggeration to say that a single page from Shakespeare, as the one quoted in the epigraph to this paper⁹³, can teach us more about identity or the human condition than Parfit's two bulky volumes or a large volume by Heidegger. The philosophical question conceived in terms of noetic heterogeneity seems to find more resources in modern literature than in modern philosophy. The history of ideas, as studied by Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor, for example, is more likely to help us than game theory or science fiction.

On the one hand, perhaps we can describe mental states or the «mind» that commands and the limbs that execute its commands impersonally. On the other hand, experiences and desires, tasting, running, standing, envy, resentment, happiness, depression, or dwelling on an abstract idea, all have a certain property in being mine or being my experiences, different from any synchronic or diachronic sum of experiences.

Although a full answer is beyond the scope of this (and probably any other) essay, and while we acknowledge the «burdens of reason» (intellectual error, disputes among the wise, lack of time and attention, etc.), we suggest that the recovery of *doxa* makes possible to find a way forward in two different dimensions, one negative and one positive. The first, as we have said, means ruling out common fallacies, and the second aims to enrich the contents of the reply to the question of what a person is⁹⁴. The opinion (or *doxa*) that the history of ideas proposes to examine reveals a rich panorama. The history of ideas is fundamentally a large-scale effort to respond to the injunction of the Temple of Apollo at Delphi: «Know thyself». We are animals who feel pain, get injured, eat food, bleed, and laugh. We are more than a mind, a brain, or a foot that feels pain; it is a person with their whole body that suffers. We are also rational and dependent animals, defined by social life. Jews and Christians, Muslims and atheists, English lovers of freedom and German lovers of order, children and parents, rulers and philosophers – we are all things that in everyday language emerge as answers to the question of what gives us identity. We cannot properly frame these identity problems if we entirely discard

⁹³ SHAKESPEARE, W., *The Merchant of Venice*, RAFFEL, B. (ed.), New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2006, 78.

⁹⁴ The works of Isaiah Berlin and Charles Taylor seem to follow this path: BERLIN, I., *The Crooked Timber of Humanity*, HARDY, H. (ed.), Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2013; and TAYLOR, C., *Sources of the Self*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989.

the notions of «person» as «rational in nature», an idea whose introduction into philosophy was hardly trivial.

6. CONCLUDING REMARKS

In the recent literature in analytic philosophy and in rigorous phenomenology, the questions and encircling ideas about «personhood» are now apparently entangled in intractable puzzles; therefore, it has become frequent to suggest that we should entirely dispense with the idea of «person», the origin of which is more theological than strictly philosophical. It has become frequent to make such a suggestion because, some say, in a moral and philosophical world – now deeply secularized – there is no place for notions whose roots are theological in origin.

This is part of a trend that is opening a chasm between the vocabularies of philosophy and theology. It is this same trend that seeks also to jettison such ideas as «dignity», «human nature», and even social and political notions such as «promises», «hospitality», and «commitment». As such, it seems to have no place in a secularized world or its vocabulary.

In this essay we argued that, on the contrary, the notion of «person», and even of rational «nature», which are essential in theological exploration, cannot, however, be easily discarded from the philosophical vocabulary either. Discarding these notions would result in an impoverishment of philosophical language itself. Not even the exploration in much recent literature of the philosophical problem of personal identity, framed in terms of the relationship between mind and brain, could dispense with a quasi-metaphysical vocabulary. Our main contention has been that what has made the very articulation of the question of personal identity fruitless is the current «scientific» straitjacket.

In this paper, we also, pointed out an alternative path – though we could not fully explore it: that the preferred route of access should instead be a «metaphysics» that preserves the noetic heterogeneity of beings⁹⁵.

⁹⁵ We further explore this idea in COLEN, J. A. and VECCHIO, A., «Mind, Self and the Need of a Metavocabulary», in MOREIRA, P. (ed.), *Revisiting Richard Rorty*, Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2020, 169-186. For a different view in the same volume, see Robert Brandom's «Rorty on vocabularies», 1-24.

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